



Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies



SPECIAL ASSESSMENT

MARCH 2003

Asia-Pacific Responses to U.S. Security Policies

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A Late Honeymoon: China's Response to U.S. Security Policies

D E N N Y R O Y

Executive Summary

- The currently favorable state of U.S.-China relations should not obscure China's basically negative view of some important Bush administration policies.
- In general, China considers the Bush government prone to unilateralism and determined to further increase America's military superiority over the rest of the world. Beijing is deeply disturbed by both of these perceived tendencies.
- Despite its unhappiness with many U.S. policies, China places a high priority on stable relations with the United States and is reluctant to directly challenge America except on issues of vital Chinese interest.
- Although the war against terrorism has in some respects strengthened America's strategic position at China's expense, Chinese support for the antiterror campaign has helped accelerate the recovery of U.S.-China relations after the EP-3 collision in April 2001.
- Among the downsides of the war against terrorism for China are the Bush administration's pronouncements on preemptive action and nuclear strategy, which the Chinese believe are dangerously aggressive.
- China opposes both national missile defense and theater missile defense. Beijing argues these are destabilizing and warns that China may respond by deploying a larger number of ballistic missiles.
- China's publication of regulations limiting Chinese export of missile technology was a success for the Bush administration's nonproliferation policy. How strictly China adheres to its commitments, however, remains to be seen.
- Although cross-Straits relations are presently stable, China remains displeased with the Bush administration's increased support for Taiwan.

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE MAR 2003		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2003 to 00-00-2003	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE A Late Honeymoon: China's Response to U.S. Security Policies				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies, 2058 Maluhia Road, Honolulu, HI, 96815				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 7	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

After a turbulent beginning, U.S.-China relations during the Bush II era have reached a state both sides describe as satisfactory. The war against terrorism and bilateral trade provide a foundation for cooperation, which both Beijing and Washington choose to emphasize at present. Some U.S. policies, nevertheless, rankle the Chinese (even if their complaints are currently subdued), and point to long-term challenges that America and China have yet to resolve.

CHINESE PERCEPTIONS OF U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

U.S. China policy has two broad features. The first is a consensus on “engagement” and a continuation of a robust bilateral economic relationship. Under the Bush administration, the U.S. government maintained support for Chinese entry into the World Trade Organization, in December 2001. The second feature is concern over rising Chinese power and influence, manifested for example in the Pentagon’s annual report on the PRC military and in the U.S.-China Security Review Commission’s 2002 report to Congress.

From China’s standpoint, America’s posture toward China is ambiguous at best. China views the United States similar to how many in the Asia-Pacific region see China: as both a threat and an opportunity. Although America is perceived as China’s chief potential adversary, Beijing also believes it is crucial to maintain good relations with the United States in the interest of sustaining Chinese economic development. As a large, developing country, China requires economic and political space for expansion in terms of market access and political influence. A long-standing Chinese concern is what they see as American reluctance to grant China such space.

Like many other countries, China perceives a greater American inclination toward unilateralism since the Bush administration took office. In China’s view the United States, not satisfied with being the world’s strongest military power, aims to achieve absolute global military superiority by the elimination of any potential threat to its security and any challenge to or constraint upon its freedom to maneuver. Chinese commentators conjecture the Bush team decided that with its unparalleled relative strength, the United States could worry less about securing international cooperation or approbation. The Chinese contend this unilateralism is threatening to other countries, (who find they have decreasing influence over U.S. policies they may believe are harmful), and is ultimately a counterproductive stance because America will alienate the allies whose cooperation Americans need.

Early in the Bush administration, the Chinese openly decried American “hegemonism”: using unmatched U.S. power to force the rest of the world to conform to narrowly self-interested arrangements that privilege America’s opportunities for security and prosperity. A traditional aphorism captures Chinese sentiments: “provincial officials are allowed to light fires, but the common people are not even permitted to light lamps.”

Among Beijing’s policy-making elite, the prevailing view is that China should approach this situation with patience. Chinese strategists have reached consensus on two points. First, the stronger China becomes, the more accommodating the United States will be toward China. Enhanced “comprehensive” Chinese power — not only military capability, but also economic development and sociopolitical cohesion — will result in a U.S.-China relationship that is more favorable for China. Second, it is unwise for China to directly challenge the United States during America’s “unipolar moment” of

unparalleled power except where absolutely necessary (for example, over the Taiwan issue, which China views as an important national sovereignty question).

Enter the Bush administration, which took office expressing a desire to downgrade the importance of U.S.-China relations by redirecting emphasis away from China and toward U.S. allies in the region, such as South Korea and Japan. This seemed to indicate that Washington was willing to risk a certain degree of deterioration in U.S.-China relations. This deterioration came with unexpected depth and swiftness after the EP-3 collision incident of April 2001. Following this nadir, however, U.S.-China relations have steadily improved. In particular, the Chinese have made a conscious effort to appear less hostile and more accommodating toward the United States. In recent months, for example, the Chinese have complained less about U.S. military bases in the region or about perceived American hegemonism.

Unfortunately, the grounding for this upturn in relations appears none too solid. Some Bush administration policies are at odds with Chinese interests, and even in the campaign against terrorists Beijing and the United States have clearly differing aims.

THE WAR AGAINST TERRORISM

China has consistently expressed official support for the war against terrorism. Beijing felt compelled to align itself with all the other major states after Sept. 11 both to preclude international opprobrium and to avoid offending the United States at a time when Americans were motivated and mobilized to take strong counteraction.

Not surprisingly, China has sought to leverage its public support for America's war on terrorism as a means of gaining concessions. In particular, the Chinese have demanded that Washington return the favor by recognizing Uighur separatists in the Chinese province of Xinjiang as "terrorists." The United States complied by designating the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) a terrorist organization with links to al Qaeda, freezing the group's U.S. assets and co-sponsoring (along with China, Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan) a request that the UN add ETIM to its list of terrorist groups. This American concession to Beijing may have cleared the way for the Chinese to issue their regulations on missile technology export, which followed shortly thereafter.

The most important result of China's generally supportive posture has been an acceleration of the improvement of U.S.-China relations that followed the aircraft collision crisis of April 2001. High-level bilateral consultations and military-to-military contact have increased, and the general tone of U.S.-China diplomacy has softened, with more emphasis on the cooperative rather than the competitive aspects of the relationship. Despite the Bush administration's initial inclination to downgrade U.S. China relations, the war on terrorism has elevated China's standing with Washington in two ways. First, America desires Chinese cooperation in the antiterror campaign — not only logistical help in tracking al Qaeda affiliates in Central Asia, but more importantly diplomatic support for controversial U.S. proposals. Second, in the minds of many U.S. strategists, global terrorism replaced China as the primary potential threat to American interests after 9/11. China changed overnight from latent adversary to campaign partner. As one Chinese scholar wrote in *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi (Contemporary International Relations)* in November 2002, "Sept. 11 enabled the relationship to avoid the possibility of a new cold war."

Notwithstanding, the Chinese are clearly disturbed by the aggressiveness Washington is displaying in some aspects of the war against terrorism. The campaign has several

downsides for China. Chinese observers believe the United States has greatly enhanced its global strategic and political influence at China's expense, including establishing a U.S. military presence in central Asia; improving U.S. relations with Pakistan, Russia, and India; and rendering irrelevant the Chinese-backed Shanghai Cooperative Organization. One view not uncommon in China is that the United States hoped to place military bases in central Asia long before 9/11 to help "contain" China and Russia and to control the flow of the region's oil and natural gas, but lacked a palatable justification until after the terrorist attacks. A mitigating view, offered by some Chinese analysts, is that the U.S. military bases in central Asia may not be permanent, and that it is not clear whether a small number of U.S. forces in Eurasia is a strategic asset or a liability for the United States. Some Chinese strategists argue that U.S. unilateralism has increased since Sept. 11, but most seem to believe that the need for international cooperation in a global antiterror campaign has forced Washington to accommodate the sentiments of other countries, reversing a previous trend.

The Chinese do not accept the Bush administration's contention that the Saddam Hussein regime in Iraq poses a compelling danger to U.S. security. Some Chinese analysts assert that a desire to capture control of Iraq's oil fields or a personal vendetta against Saddam is at the core of Washington's pressure on the Iraqi leadership. China traditionally disapproves of both U.S. and UN intervention, even against allegedly outlaw states. At the same time, China is loathe to distinguish itself as an outlier defying international consensus. In late 2002, therefore, China took the same position as France and Russia: the initial UN resolution should demand that Saddam Hussein demonstrate he holds no weapons of mass destruction, but should not authorize the United States to take military action against Iraq for noncompliance. Rather, in the event of noncompliance, the United States should seek a second resolution from the UN authorizing the use of force. During the weeks following the return of inspectors to Iraq, Chinese officials and media expressed hope for a peaceful resolution of the crisis.

Chinese analysts believe the current level of American focus on terrorism is not sustainable and that U.S. Asia policy will eventually gravitate back toward its pre-Sept. 11 orientation. Where this will leave China is uncertain. If the perceived threat of terror subsides, Americans might return to contemplating the potential challenges posed by a stronger China. On the other hand, the improvement in U.S.-China relations might persist, reflective of a mid-term adjustment in China policy by the Bush administration that would fit the pattern of past presidencies.

Since Sept. 11, Washington has promulgated policies that could be interpreted to indicate a willingness to launch preemptive attacks and to use nuclear weapons against states the United States deems threatening. Beijing reacted negatively, of course, when news reports in March 2002 revealed that the *U.S. Nuclear Posture Review* named China as one of seven countries that "could be involved in an immediate or potential contingency" in which the United States might use nuclear weapons. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Sun Yuxi said his government was "deeply shocked," and Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing warned against the practice of "nuclear blackmail." Chinese commentators saw the White House's *National Security Strategy*, released in September 2002, as a shift from deterrence to preemptive military action against either terrorist organizations or states America considered hostile. The official Chinese media, nevertheless, reacted cautiously, typified by a *Xinhua* report that read, "The consequences of such a strategy have yet to unfold."

On balance, most Chinese strategists see the U.S. war on terrorism as a positive development thus far. America's global influence and military activity have increased, but the focus of U.S. effort is directed away from containing China.

ANTIMISSILE DEFENSE SYSTEMS

Beijing opposes the Bush administration's missile defense programs, both national missile defense and theater missile defense. The Chinese argue that American missile defense systems would undermine international stability and undercut the basis of cooperation among the major powers. An anti-missile shield would further increase American military superiority over its would-be rivals, accentuating an imbalance that already frightens countries such as China. The United States, the Chinese say, could then behave as it wished with no fear of retaliation even from the other nuclear-armed countries. The Chinese have warned that U.S. deployment of an antimissile system could trigger a new arms race, including an expansion of the PRC's nuclear arsenal.

The U.S. government's announcement in December 2002 of its intention to deploy an anti-missile system by 2004 brought renewed official Chinese condemnation. China's representative at the United Nations office in Geneva, arms control expert Sha Zukang, warned that the U.S. system "will disrupt global strategic balance and stability."

Japan's involvement in a U.S.-sponsored missile defense system troubles China. The Chinese argue that Japan has no legitimate need for a shield against ballistic missiles. Despite the launch of a Taepo Dong missile into the atmosphere over Japan in 1998, Beijing dismisses concerns about a North Korean missile capability as baseless, since Pyongyang is a weak country obsessed with self-defense. The real target of the antimissile system, the Chinese argue, is China, and the real motivation for building it comes from militarists who exaggerate the "China threat" as a pretext for strengthening Japan's armed forces. Even absent such nefarious designs, an effective missile defense could potentially negate China's nuclear edge over Japan. From China's standpoint, it is important that the PRC have an effective nuclear deterrent to balance what the Chinese view as strong Japanese conventional forces and the possibility of a revival of Japanese militarism. Furthermore, China particularly worries about the prospect that a mobile U.S.-Japan missile defense might someday protect Taiwan.

NONPROLIFERATION

The Bush administration has maintained a long-standing American policy of discouraging China from exporting missile and weapons of mass destruction (WMD) technology. Official Chinese views on nonproliferation have converged somewhat in recent years with those of Washington. With Chinese adopting an increasingly global outlook as their country gains power and influence, some Chinese strategic planners have warmed to the view that proliferation can be harmful to China's global interests. China is also clearly concerned about burnishing its international reputation as a responsible country in step with global norms, and desires to smooth relations with the United States where possible without sacrificing vital Chinese interests. China is a signatory to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, the Biological Weapons Convention and the Chemical Weapons Convention and claims to adhere to these agreements. Beijing also says it is committed to the principle of nonproliferation of missiles and WMD.

The most notable payoff of the Bush administration's nonproliferation pressure on China is Beijing's publication of a document on "Regulations on Export Control of Missiles and Missile-related Items and Technologies." In November 2000, Chinese officials agreed to stop selling missiles and to promulgate regulations governing the export of Chinese missile technology based on guidelines in the Missile Technology Control

Regime. The U.S. government had prohibited American companies from launching U.S. commercial satellites on Chinese rockets; the Chinese said they would publish their regulations after the United States lifted this prohibition. When Washington levied sanctions against Chinese firms in September 2001 for selling missile components to Pakistan, Beijing countered that its pledges did not apply to deals signed before November 2000. Nevertheless, even without Washington meeting their demands, in August 2002 the Chinese published their self-restrictions on missile technology transfer.

While Beijing's official commitments are welcome, Chinese adherence to these commitments remains problematic. Through late 2002, the Bush administration had levied sanctions against Chinese firms four times over objectionable exports. In each case the Chinese argued that the allegations and punishments were unjustified. A recent report by the CIA labels China a "key supplier" of WMD and delivery system technology. In June 2002, shortly before Beijing issued its written regulations, Assistant Secretary of State for Nonproliferation John Wolf testified to Congress that China was transferring "missile-related items, raw materials, and/or assistance" to several countries, including Libya and alleged "axis of evil" members North Korea and Iran.

The efficacy of Beijing's new commitments will become clearer through 2003. In the short term, the fallout from the past, particularly Chinese assistance to the Pakistani nuclear and North Korean missile programs (which led to the India-Pakistan nuclear crisis of 1998 and the current crisis over North Korea's nuclear program), is likely to overshadow the political benefits China might have gained from its seemingly more cooperative attitude toward non-proliferation. High-ranking American officials have made clear that they consider progress in Chinese nonproliferation a high priority.

FORWARD DEPLOYMENT AND INTEGRATION

The Chinese have been historically ambivalent toward the U.S. military presence in the Western Pacific, and on balance more negative since the 1990s. Some Chinese accept that U.S. bases in Japan and Korea and the movement of U.S. warships through Asian seas help keep the region peaceful. Others maintain that these forces are designed to "contain" China and must eventually leave. The center of gravity within this range of views shifts according to the general state of U.S.-China relations. Most Chinese, nevertheless, would tend to view the increased deployment of U.S. forces to Guam as a reaction to China's growing power.

Under the concept of "integration," the Bush administration has asserted America's responsibility and interest in promoting democracy, civil liberties and the rule of law throughout the world. China has tended to characterize similar policies by past U.S. governments as an American strategy to overthrow the rule of the Chinese Communist Party in an effort to promote political chaos and thereby weaken China. For decades, the Chinese have reacted to U.S. criticism of China's human rights record as a part of this alleged strategy. Official U.S. condemnation of human rights problems in China has continued under the Bush administration, even during the war against terrorism. The results, however, have been better than in the past. In December 2002, China and the United States resumed a human rights dialogue that had been suspended since U.S. aircraft mistakenly bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999. Beijing recently agreed to give the United Nations unconditional access to investigate alleged human rights violations in China. This was a marked shift from Beijing's previous objections to foreign criticism of China's human rights record.

TAIWAN

Beijing argues that Bush's Taiwan policy constitutes interference in China's domestic affairs (because in Beijing's view Taiwan is part of China) and therefore violates China's sovereignty. The United States, says Beijing, is contravening the "one-China" principle and the American commitment in the 1982 U.S.-China Joint Communiqué to "gradually reduce its sales of arms to Taiwan." These charges are not new, but the Chinese believe U.S. support for Taiwan has grown appreciably since Bush took office. Bush's public commitment to do "whatever it takes" to help Taiwan defend itself from possible Chinese aggression was the strongest and clearest verbal statement of its kind from a U.S. president since the establishment of normal Sino-U.S. relations. The arms sales package for Taiwan approved by the Bush administration in 2001 was unusually large (\$5 billion, the largest since the sale of 150 F-16s in 1992). The U.S. government allowed Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian to visit New York City and to meet with members of the U.S. Congress. Chinese observers have been disappointed at the unwillingness of high-ranking Bush administration officials to publicly express U.S. opposition to Taiwan independence, which would go a step beyond saying that Washington has a one-China policy. Finally, under the Bush administration, contact and cooperation between the militaries of the United States and Taiwan have improved, leading to Beijing's accusations that Washington and Taipei are moving closer to a military alliance.

There has been little to balance these developments, which from the Chinese standpoint are alarming. Beijing nonetheless took some comfort from Washington's reaffirmation of the one-China principle immediately after Chen's "one country on either side of the Taiwan Strait" statement in August 2002.

CONCLUSION

During periods of recovery from a downturn in bilateral relations, the United States and China typically focus on common interests and areas of agreement rather than on unresolved disputes. The latter half of the Bush II administration (first term) is such a period. The war on terrorism provides scope for limited U.S.-China cooperation, although China and the United States have not had identical views on dealing with Iraq. There are tentative signs of positive Chinese reaction to U.S. policies related to democratic integration and non-proliferation. Beijing sees value in maintaining a stable working relationship with Washington and will choose its battles carefully rather than denounce the entire range of U.S. policies. Nevertheless, China is deeply apprehensive about America's military strength and American global activism in support of what the Chinese believe are often narrow U.S. interests. China continues to openly oppose Bush administration policies on missile defense systems, forward basing of U.S. forces, and Taiwan. The atmospherics in the U.S.-China relationship may have changed, probably temporarily, but not the fundamentals.